

Built to Resist

Written by Justin Goldman

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Ryan Miller is facing quite a arduous situation this year. His Sabres have been severely downgraded from “Stanley Cup favorite” to “playoff hopeful” due to the loss of Chris Drury and Daniel Briere. In fact, no other starting goaltender will have to deal with nearly this type of tumultuous roster turnover. So why is Miller so darn excited for the season to start?



Well, it's all in how you look at things.

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Anyone will tell you that pessimism has no place in the mind of a starting goaltender, so the pressure of knowing he has to play like the league's MVP is something that Miller is really looking forward to.

For when you come so close to winning it all and then lose two vital components - two co-captains with career-high point outputs to be exact - nothing seems fair. Like sand escaping your clutches, all you can take from the loss is the experience. But you live to see another day, and for Miller, that day has been in the back of his mind all summer long.

Now the dawn of a new day has finally come, giving him the chance to prove everyone wrong by leading his team to the Stanley Cup Playoffs once again.

"Everyone on our team has taken a step forward as far as experience goes, so I don't doubt that we have the team to get back there again, Miller explained. "Everyone has been talking about losing Drury and Briere, who obviously were key parts of the team, but we also learned a lot from them. Our guys are going to step up and play a bigger role this year and our core group of players are going to be real exciting to watch."

While players like Maxim Afinogenov and Thomas Vanek obviously come to mind, how are they going to compete with a team like the Penguins or the Rangers? The answer most definitely lies in Miller's play. In fact, he's answered these persistent questions the same way all summer long - two talented players don't define a team completely. For everyone knows a championship

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squad starts from the net out.

“They did a lot for us but we also did a lot for them, so it was a complete team effort and that is kind of what they taught us and preached to us through their leadership,” Miller said regarding Drury and Briere. “But my attitude is not going to change and I have encouraged my players not to change their attitude either. Leadership is going to be a learning experience early in the season for us, so the only question should be about how those things are going to be handled.”

“My players...” - that’s the kind of answer you want to hear from your starting goaltender. Miller has become a responsible leader on the ice and in the locker room and has made it obvious to the hockey world that he has the character and poise to lead this team back to the Eastern Conference Finals.

“I’m going to try and step up and do as much as possible with the experience I gained through what I learned from Drury and Briere and keep moving forward,” Miller said. “I’ve learned a lot from them and I’ll put it to the best use I can.”

One new Sabre who will boost the team’s chemistry is backup goalie Jocelyn Thibault. Although he won’t impact the box score on a nightly basis, his amiable character and role as a veteran will provide much-needed stability for Miller, the team and the coaching staff. In fact, T-Bo is someone that Miller can call upon to be a teacher and a comrade.

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“In spending time with Jocelyn the last few weeks, he seems to be a great person. I respect the way he approaches the game and he’s easy to talk to,” Miller said about his new buddy. “In that regard, it’s going to help me a lot to be able to talk about what’s happening on the ice. He’s the kind of guy you can talk to about anything and I’m excited to have him as a teammate.”

So despite the drastic changes, the focus stays the same. Miller has done a great job of deflecting the media buzz away from his forwards by making himself responsible for the team’s success. He’s even built the Sabres up to play as underdogs with a very strong sense of “team.”

“I don’t think our style changes with the losses,” Miller said. “We play our system very well with the core group of guys that we have, so let’s see how some guys fill in with those roles. It’s been an interesting summer answering questions, but I think our attitude and talent remains the same. Like I’ve said, as much as they [Drury and Briere] helped us out, it wasn’t all them.”

For Miller, the proof of this team’s success lies in his on-ice actions. He’s ready for this fight and he won’t give up until the league realizes that the Sabres are comprised of two goaltenders, six defensemen and 12 forwards.

Many still believe that if you cut off this team’s head, the body will follow. Is that true for the Sabres? Only time will tell - only Miller’s play will ultimately decide. For the fate of this team is in his hands.